



NOAA *Backgrounder*

Hurricane Hugo—An Eyewitness Account

George Metts is a paramedic who was assigned to the Lincoln High School in McClellanville, S.C., the evening of Thursday, September 21, 1989—the night that Hurricane Hugo struck the South Carolina coast. The Lincoln High School had been designated as a primary hurricane shelter based on a hurricane evacuation study done in 1987. The study listed the High School as “dry” through a Category 4 storm and not subject to a storm surge. It also showed the elevation of the school at about 20 feet. After the storm had passed, it was discovered that the correct elevation of the school was actually closer to ten feet above sea level. The actual storm surge was later measured to be about 16 feet at the High School. More than 1 100 people took refuge in the school that night. More than 400 crowded into the school’s cafeteria. Mr. Metts’ hair raising account follows:

At 1800 hours on Thursday, September 21, 1989, Tim Lockridge and I were relocated from Medic six station in McClellanville to Lincoln high school. Unknown to us, we were within one quarter mile from the Intracoastal Waterway.

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We set up our station in the arts and crafts room, and got totally drenched from the sudden onset of wind gusts and rain squalls while carrying equipment and supplies into the building. Lynn Bost helped us carry boxes of supplies brought from our station.

We settled in and made our makeshift bunks from tables and tried to hang clothes up to dry.

At approximately 2000 hours, we were requested by a concerned family to bring in an invalid man from a home not far from the school. The rain squalls were still only occasional, so we ventured out. We went to a darkened house lit by a flashlight. Then the wind and rain became more ferocious, and we quickly loaded the man onto the stretcher, and packed his wheelchair and wife into the unit, and rushed back to the shelter. The rain pelted us until we were drenched. On arriving back at the shelter, we placed our patient in a separate room.

We returned to our room and hung our clothes up to dry. I laid down and Tim tried to read. Another concerned family asked us to go out and pick up a relative and bring him to the shelter but we could not due to the increased winds and rain. Some time after this the electricity failed and only the hall emergency lights stayed on. Tim went out to read and I tried to sleep. Those lights lasted maybe an hour and then they went out, so we both laid down and tried to rest.

At 0138 we were awakened by rushing water. Sensed, rather than knew, that something was dangerously wrong. I rushed frantically to get dressed. We turned on our flashlights and could see water rushing through the air conditioners and water rising rapidly around our boots and equipment. We grabbed our gear and piled it onto the stretcher. I then attempted to pick up my personal gear, (suitcase, etc.) And then abandoned it as the water rose and Tim and I struggled to get the door open and threw our medical gear outside. All this happened in less than five minutes. Thinking our room was flooding, we shoved the

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continued from previous page

door closed hoping this would slow or stop the flooding, but the hallway was rising above our ankles. We knew the nearby double door was chained and locked, so we pushed our way through the rapidly rising water.

Jennings Austin, principal of Lincoln High, was dashing madly past us with numerous people in tow. We tried to turn the people back, raising our voices, to no avail as the people screamed past us. We turned toward the chained door and all realized the door was held shut by incoming water. Mr. Austin then rushed back down the hall. We tried to tell the people to keep moving calmly down the hall to the exit, but they continued screaming as before.

By the time we reached the main hallway, the water was waist high and Mr. Austin disappeared down another main hall and into the darkness, followed by the crowd of people. I checked the front door and the water level outside could be seen rising over the door handle outside and several inches above the glass. In chest-high water, I turned and told Tim to forget the equipment, I would check the cafeteria.

I became separated from Tim and with water still rising, the door became almost impossible to reopen. I pushed further into the room of screaming women and equally frantic men thrashing about the room. Some were slowly making their way to the stage and many more were already there, possibly three or four hundred. Some were screaming, some were yelling, some were quiet but all were frantic. I was as frantic as the others but tried to keep it inside to encourage those around me.

I then went to the window with another man and we attempted to knock out the plexiglass with a fire extinguisher, with no success. The window measured from waist high almost to the ceiling, 15 to 18 feet high. About this time we saw that the outside level of water was almost one foot higher than inside and the window was bulging inward. We yelled and screamed for the others not to break the windows. Some stopped and some kept right on. Midway down the room a window was broken, and due to the massive force, the water kept us all trapped inside.

As the water level inside approached my upper chest, I climbed up onto a table edge with everyone else and waited. We helped one another and huddled on the table yelling at the others to do likewise. The noise was so great that those who couldn't hear us seemed to follow instinctively, climbing onto chairs and tables. Realizing we were trapped with no way out, I began looking for another exit. Only by knocking out an upper window could we make a try for the roof and safety.

The man next to me climbed to the window. He tried to pound it with his fist. I gave him my knife and the flashlight. We would have used the fire extinguisher, but it had long since floated away.

For more information contact National Hurricane Center Public Affairs at (305) 229-4404 or visit the Web site at <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov>.

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I then climbed up to the window, and after several minutes of pounding with the flashlight, I tired, and while climbing down, fell into the warm salt water. It seemed to reassure me rather than frighten me, and I swam back to the table and was again helped up.

The enormity of our situation was staggering. We were totally trapped. The tidal surge had risen so rapidly that we had no time to call for help. My walkie talkie had gotten wet earlier, and now it had fallen into the inky darkness. We were on our own. The water was still rising, and those that could were packed like sardines on the stage.

My group consisted of ten to fifteen women, children and some men. I noticed a woman nearby trying to hold up two children. I took one and held her above the water. She was a three-year-old named Tsara. I tried to talk to her calmly, and asked if she was scared. She said yes. I told her I was too, but that everything would be all right. I became silent, thinking of my four-year-old daughter and family, praying they were OK. As the water came up to my chest, we all tried to raise the children higher.

The man next to me kept monitoring the water levels, but he needn't have because we could feel and see it trying to envelope us. He told us the outside level was two feet about the inside level.

The clock read 0200 hours. The numerous flashlights stayed on so you could see the forms huddled on the stage and nearby tables. One couple refused the safety of the tables and stage and insisted on floating with their household goods.

We stayed in chest-high water for several hours. I remember talking and singing to the child, trying to pass time. During this time I calmed down an hysterical woman who was hyperventilating. I knew I had to calm her down, because had she fallen, she would have knocked others into the deepening water. I could not help one person without jeopardizing others, so I spoke as calmly as possible so others could hear me and also be calmed.

Sometime around 0300 hours someone outside on the roof knocked out a top window pane on the opposite wall. Only a few dared the climb to safety. I knew the women couldn't swim across the cafeteria, and I knew I could not swim the distance with a three-year-old in tow, so I prayed, along with everyone else. I continued to talk to the baby and hold her up above the water level.

Finally, the outside water level lowered, and stopped coming in the broken window. Eventually, the level descended. I remember smelling cooking grease, and gas fumes from the cars floating by outside, while they rammed into our ambulance. After 4:00 or 5:00 that morning, the water level lowered and we were able to open the door and look around the hall. We helped the people off the tables. I checked and no one in the cafeteria was injured. ☺